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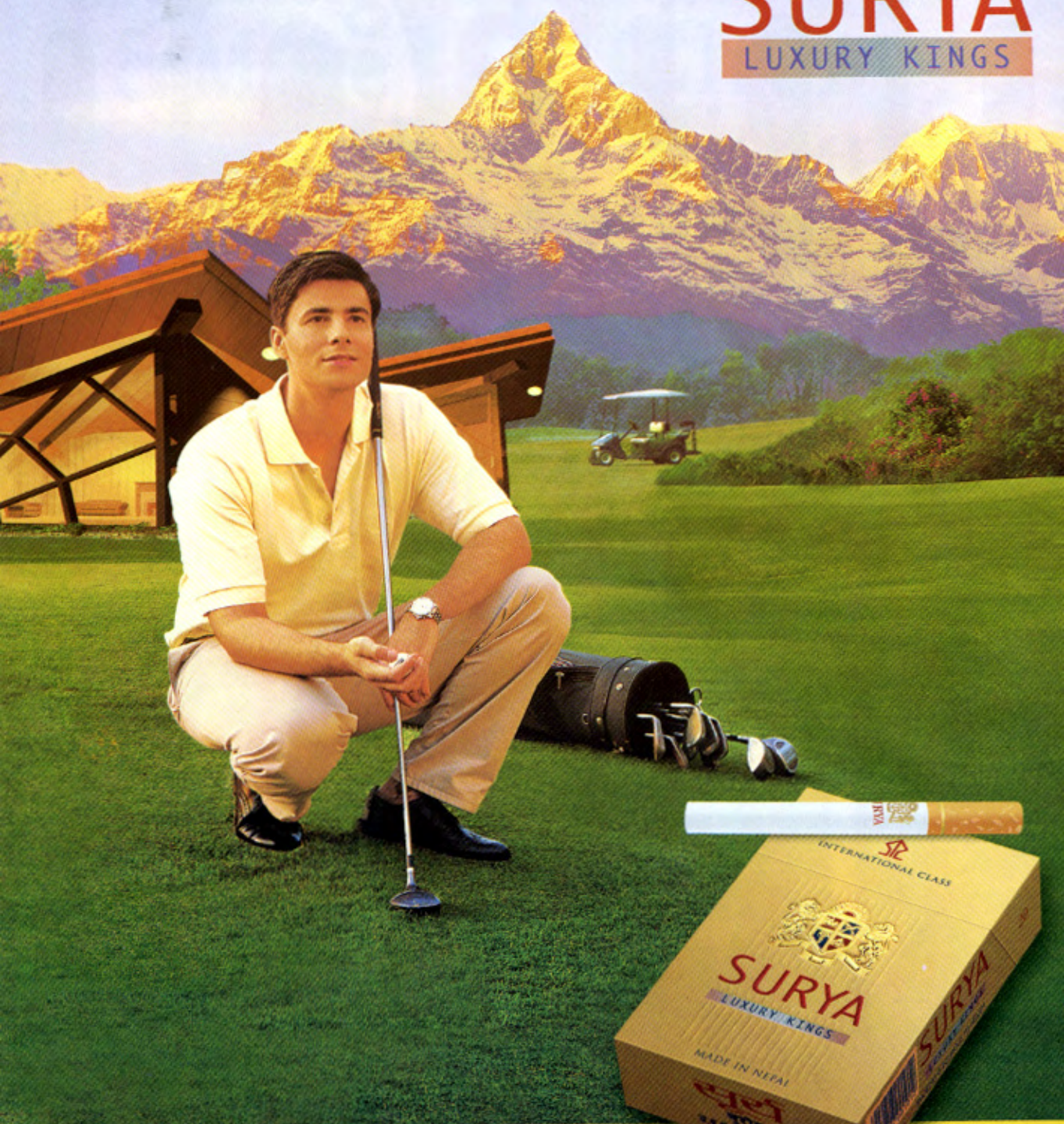


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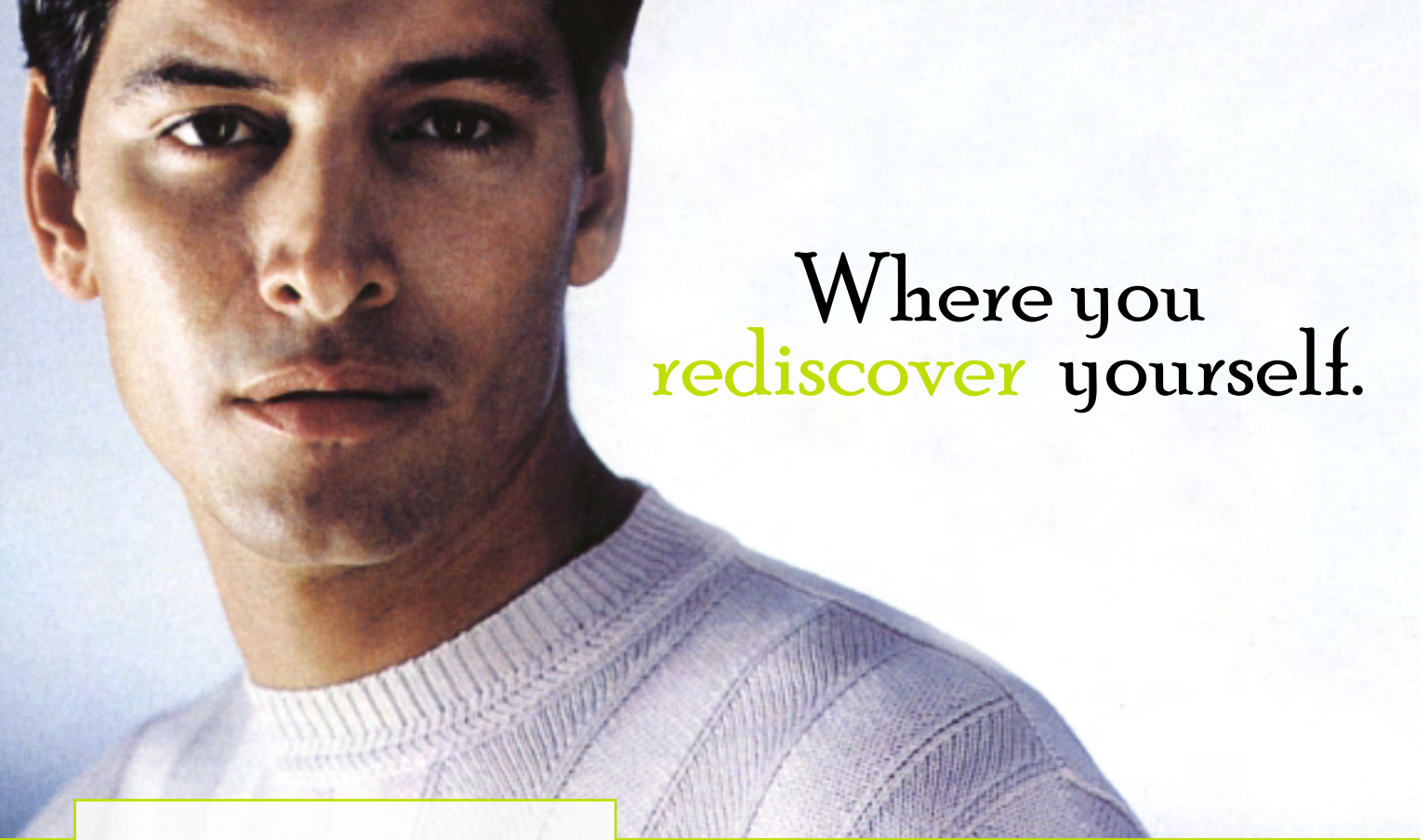
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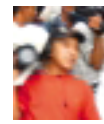
18 Collateral Damage

By Sushma Joshi

The repercussion of bandas goes far beyond economics. While television footage of truckloads of okra being discarded by farmers in protest on our highways capture the level of damage to the national economy, what goes unreported are the small, micro-level effects on Nepal's most vulnerable citizens—women, children and old people

16 ON TENTERHOOKS

By Suresh Pradhan



But it took 14 days after Prime Minister Thapa's resignation for the King and the parties to start talking. First, though, came the frantic rounds of consultations with everyone—from former prime ministers to diplomats to civil society representatives to Palace insiders.

24 All's Not Well In Mao-land

By Binaj Gurubacharya in Musikot



In Rukum, one administrative chief is only 20-years old but rules 35 villages. He says he was elected district chief in a ballot. All the candidates, however were believed to have links to the Maoists. This, after all, is the Maoist heartland; there is no political opposition.

26 Withdrawal Symptoms

By John Narayan Parajuli in Damak

UNHCR has made it clear that come what may, any likely extension of its December 2005 deadline for the pullout from the camps may be stretched by six months at most. But refugee leaders are apprehensive about the proposed pullout.

ARTS & SOCIETY

30 Worldly-wise Compassion

By Tiku Gauchan

Arya Tara School takes in girls from poor families, ordains them as nuns and provides them with both a Buddhist and a secular education.

32 Tell Me A Story

By Satish Jung Shahi

Maithili storytelling culture is still vibrant, primarily because women storytellers have kept up the tradition.

DEPARTMENTS

6 LETTERS

10 PICTURE OF THE WEEK

14 CAPSULES

35 CITY PAGE

40 KHULA MANCH: MILAN RAI

41 BOOKS

42 LAST WORD

COLUMNS

11 Unchain My Education

By Suman Pradhan

I happen to be one of those growing number of people who do not see any meaningful purpose the politicians-in-students'-disguise serve.

28 Rape Seed

By Samuel Thomas

As the west rejects genetically modified crops, they are being dumped in the South. This is one such story. Of how canola, the Canadian oilseed, is invading our own Khokana, once famous for its mustard presses.

34 Of Witchcraft And Witches

By Deepak Thapa

It is a thin line to cross from believing that the stars rule our lives to being convinced that someone is the cause of our misfortunes.

36 Objection Overruled

By Jogendra Ghimire

Appointments of Anup Raj Sharma and Balram K.C., none of them Appellate Court judges, to the Supreme Court Bench have come under fire from the establishment. But Sharma and K.C. both have solid track records.

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SEE PAGE 22.



“ Nepal is in a worse state now than it was 19 months ago when the King assumed executive powers...”

SANJEEV M. SHERCHAN

Bush begone!

WHILE I WHOLE-HEARTEDLY agree with the main thrust of Samrat Upadhyay’s article (“Bush Begone!” Sense & Nonsense, May 23), I am also tempted to soothe his perplexity over the question: how can one “support the troops” while, at the same time, “oppose the war?”



On the other hand, we have to understand that the American foot soldiers, mainly composed of young men and women in their late teens and early twenties, did not volunteer to go fight in Iraq—they were merely being good soldiers and following the orders of their Commander-in-Chief, the president. Therefore, by “supporting the troops” Americans are only hoping that their loved ones do well in what they were trained to do and return home not in coffin boxes.

If anyone detests what is going on in Iraq and vociferously opposes the war (and I happen to be one of them!), he, instead of putting the blame on the troops, should put the culprit’s label squarely on the handful of men who ordered them into this quagmire: President George W. Bush and his team of extremely narrow-minded, heartless zealots who seem to be unaffected by the deaths of human beings, both of their obedient soldiers’ and their enemies’.

I too sincerely hope that the Iraq crisis will serve as an eye-opener for the Americans and that they will choose to fire Bush out of the White House come November. People like him do not deserve to lead 250 million-plus Americans who are otherwise generally open-minded and warm-hearted.

ANIL J. SHAHI

NEWYORK

The King and them

KING GYANENDRA HAS MAINTAINED that he removed the popularly elected government of Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2002 to prevent further deterioration of the Nepali state. More than a year and half later, nothing could be further from the truth. Nepal is in a worse state now than it was 19 months ago when the King assumed executive powers and installed his handpicked government

While the political parties and their leaders must also shoulder their share of responsibility for the worsening situation in Nepal, the need of the hour is for the King and political parties to work together to put democracy back on track. The Nepali polity is still maturing and to discredit it by penalizing the very democratic process is foolhardy.

The time has come for the King to stop blaming the political parties and leaders for all the country’s ills, and to make way for an all-party government as the first step in restoring democracy and securing peace and prosperity in Nepal. For the political parties, the time has come to let bygones be bygones, discontinue daily street protests to reciprocate the King’s gesture (if he stops playing one party against another, agrees to the formation of an all-party government

and does not violate the norms of the constitutional monarchy) and uphold the spirit "Rashtriya Mel Milap," the policy of the late B. P. Koirala that brought the King and the parties together.

SANJEEV M. SHERCHAN,
ASIA SOCIETY, NEWYORK

Genesis of leaders

SWARNIM WAGLE'S TAKE ON Nepal's leaders ("Leaders Classified," Writing on the Wall, May 23) was an interesting read. He seems to have a sound grasp of Nepal's modern political history. But what about a closer look at the genesis of individual leaders? Sher Bahadur Deuba, Girija Prasad Koirala, Madhav Kumar did not shoot to stardom overnight and a lot must have gone into their emergence as national leaders. Perhaps Mr. Wagle can help trace where the fault lines lie—why did these giants fail when it mattered most: post-1990? Perhaps it's the parties' undemocratic traditions, Nepal's own deeply entrenched feudalism, or perhaps it's the leaders' failure to educate themselves to the requirement of modern leadership. Or a combination of it and or more? A similar piece on Nepali monarchy would shed light on the people's leaders even better since they do not operate in a political vacuum. So far, my knowledge of our kings is based only on social studies books in the school curricula.

PRABIN PRADHAN
BHOTAHTY

TIKU GAUCHAN'S "LUNCH Hour Rush" (May 23) is a welcome breather in a newsmagazine that gets overly serious at times. Give me my food before you give me food for thought.

SUSHMA SHRESTHA
MAHARAJGUNJ

I WAS PEEVED WHEN I LEARNED that a national glory like Ram Man Dai is facing acute housing problems ("Ram Man Dai" by Sanjeev Uprety, Arts and Society, May 23). Both the municipality and the government should be ashamed of the fact that he received no compensation after his family house was seized. Why are such people mistreated?

BASIC KATHET
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FIRST IN LINE: UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal outside the Palace after his audience with the King

nw/Sagar Shrestha



Unchain My Education

I happen to be one of those growing number of people who do not see any meaningful purpose the politicians-in-students'-disguise serve

BY SUMAN PRADHAN

Since April 1, as the five political parties intensified their street protests against “regression,” I have watched, sometimes with admiration and sometimes with dismay, the young students who have been at the forefront of the movement. Truth be told: without their active participation, the agitation would have fizzled out long before Surya Bahadur Thapa had even considered resignation.

But watching these students lead the protests and fight pitched battles with police evokes mixed emotions in me. I agree with their point that political power should be wielded by political parties entrusted by sovereign voters. And that, no matter how corrupt or inefficient these parties are, voters can always throw them out in the hustings. But my agreement with these agitating students and their parties ends there.

I happen to be one of those growing number of people who do not see any meaningful purpose these budding-politicians-in-students'-disguise serve. Alright, they serve the political parties, for whom the various affiliated student wings supply a steady stream of fresh storm-troopers to push their various agendas. But do they serve any educational purposes? Indeed, do they even serve the nation's larger interests?

If it is true, as said by many, that only widespread education can lift Nepal out of its current morass, then student political activism is ironically working against that goal. By chaining active politics with public education, the student unions and their mother parties are ensuring that the hundreds of thousands of students who attend our public educational institutions every year do not get a sound education.

This is not to blame the various party-aligned student wings which all came into existence during the dark days of the Panchayat. During those days, the student bodies and campus elections even served a noble purpose: providing the only open forum for competitive politics, albeit at the college and university level. These unions became the tools of the banned political parties to expand their organizational and ideological base. The complete suffocation of free political thought during the Panchayat turned the student unions and elections into vital outlets and safety valves that innocuously propagated the ideal of democratic politics. I thank the student unions for that.

But times have changed. We no longer live in the Panchayat (though critics of the current dispensation complain about creeping Panchayatization once again). And at least in theory, Nepal has been a multi-party democracy since 1990 where politics is freely practiced beyond campus compound walls. The nation as a whole has gone through a transformation from autocracy to democratic practices, to a system based on free political competition.

Despite these changes, student wings continue to function as they always have, seemingly oblivious to this changing political milieu. Student union members blindly work for their parties at the expense of educational agendas, while the parties fail to recognize the danger in allowing the politicization of educational institutions and students to flourish.

What has the politicization of student groups really done? In the end, the overt politicization of our educational institutions, particularly the public institutions, is coming at the cost of students themselves. It has worsened an already stumbling educational system. It has distorted student/faculty relations. And worst of all, it has turned students of the organizations into the pawns of the parties.

It's no wonder that students who are serious about their education, and can afford it, go to private schools and colleges where politics is definitely a no no. It's often the poor student from the villages, who might have mortgaged his land to a local sahuji to pursue higher education in the cities, who bears the brunt of this chaos in our public education institutions.

Given the chaos fostered by student union politics, why has no one done anything about it? There are two reasons for this. The first is that the political parties actively encourage student politics for the simple reason that it provides them a mass of energetic youth to fight their political battles. The current street protests are a case in point. The other is that, ambitious young students who strive for a political career see student activism as a ticket to

national politics. In this, they are following the path of their illustrious forbearers such as Sher Bahadur Deuba, Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat and countless others who went on to become leaders in their parties and even prime ministers and ministers.

The situation can be righted if these two reasons are dealt with effectively. If the parties are sincere about their past election manifestoes—they claim they want to provide sound education for all—

then they should distance themselves from student unionism. How about unchaining all the student unions from their mother parties?

Secondly, the parties should develop an alternate system which allows ambitious youth and students a clear roadmap to party politics. For, as long as these youths see student politics as a ticket to party politics, they will have a vested interest in keeping the system alive no matter how corrupting an influence it is on overall education.

These measures understandably call for strong political will from the party leaderships. But more than that, they call for the need to question the status quo. Why should things remain as they have for the last 40 years? **N**

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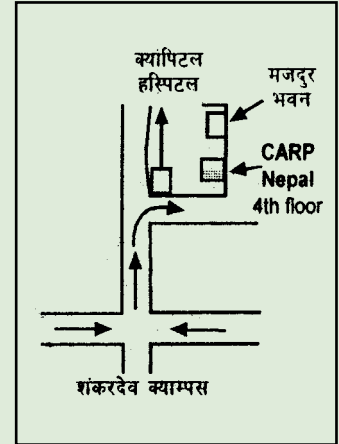
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Mounting toll

The Royal Nepal Army (RNA) put the Maoist toll since the breakdown of the ceasefire in August at 2,104 and that of the Army at 201. RNA Spokesman Brig.Gen. Rajendra Bahadur Thapa said the Army had successfully accomplished its operation in Rolpa and Baglung, the Maoist strongholds.

All the highs

Bombs, bandas and pollution have made Kathmandu less attractive, so head for Nagarkot, says Far Eastern Economic Review (May 6), which has profiled Nagarkot in its Asia/Life section. "Want to see the Himalayas without actually climbing them?" asks the Review. "Go to Nagarkot." Nagarkot has been described as a "breezy, one-road village surrounded by pine forests that perfume the air and ancient farm terraces that slice the hillsides into giant-sized step." Guess

which of Nagarkot's hotels finds itself featured by the Review? Club Himalaya, whose owner Yogendra Shakya says, "Many people are simply skipping Kathmandu."

SLC results

Bandas, protests and Maoist blockades could delay the results of this year's School Leaving Certificate Examinations. However, Examination Controller Birendra Kumar Singh said his office is trying its best to get the results out by mid-June. A total 317,001 students had taken the S.L.C examinations in 905 centers across the country.

It's time for DV

Four hundred thirty-three Nepalis have received the Diversity Visa-2005 Lottery, the ticket to permanent U.S. residency. The Nepal Samacharpatra reported 153 of them had Kathmandu's postal address—of them 70



BRAVO: Sagar Shrestha, Nation's photojournalist, wins the "Viewer's Choice Award" at the recently concluded National Forum of Photo Journalists

had their local addresses mentioned. The lists of DV-2005 winners have also been posted on the wall of the General Post Office in Sundhara. The U.S. government selects upto 50,000 applicants as winners to the Diversity Visas from around the world annually, including Nepal, for countries that are under-represented among 400,000 to 500,000 immigrants traveling to the United States each year. Last year, 4,259 Nepalis had won the DV Lottery, according to postal officials.

Press situation

The International Press Institute has termed Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's term as "memorable" for demoralizing the press with the excessive use of force. At its 53rd World Congress in Warsaw, a report presented by IPI Nepal said Nepal detained 300 journalists and human rights activists on April 17 for protesting the police high handedness against fellow journalists.

Water shortage

As the temperature shot up to the record 30s early last week, the capital's residents were in for yet another pre-monsoon blues. Nepal Water Supply Corporation says the problem intensified after 95 percent of its 123,000 consumers started

using water pumps in their homes. But that's only one of many problems. Even during the best of times, water authorities can meet only two-third of the Valley's demand. According to a study, some 40 percent of the Valley's water is lost to pilferage. The capital's long-term water problems will perhaps be solved only after the Melamchi Water Project is complete. But for now, the monsoon is almost here and Kathmanduites will probably stop complaining until another dry season.



Dysentery outbreak

With the rain came dysentery and diarrhoea. Doctors in the capital's Sukraraj Tropical Hospital in Teku reported a sharp rise in diarrhoea cases. They also reported cases of cholera and advised Kathmandu residents to avoid roadside food and to drink filtered water.

Celebrating womanhood



This year's Laxmi Award (named after Laxmi Bank) for the Woman Entrepreneur of the Year went to Binita Pradhan, Executive Director of AVCO International Pvt. Ltd. The company is the sole distributor of Hyundai Motor Company and Hyundai Motor India Ltd. Under Pradhan, the company sales increased from 51 units to over 700 units, commanding a market share of over 30 percent in small passenger car segment

and 25 percent in the total passenger car segments. The award was a part of the "Celebrating Womanhood 2004" campaign. Other awardees: first women trekker Angdela Sherpa, educationist Rani Devi Kakshyapati, fashion designer Gyani Shobha Tuladhar, social worker Radha Khadka, police woman Gita Upreti, taekwondo athlete Sangina Baidhya, writer Durga Pokharel and artist Asmina Ranjit.

Nepal's knights

Finland has knighted two Nepalis. Mohan Man Sainju, Advisor of WWF Nepal and Chandra P Gurung, Country Representative of WWF Nepal, have received "Knight, First Class, the Order of the Lion of Finland." The award was handed over to them by Glen Lindholm, Ambassador of Finland to Nepal. The decorations are in appreciation of their contribution towards biodiversity conservation. Sainju, who is an economist, once served as vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission. He was also an ambassador to the United States. Gurung is the designer of the first community-based integrated conservation and development project in Nepal, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP).

Climbing season

It's time again to update the mountaineering record books. And not all of the entries have been happy ones this time round. Scores of climbers made it to the Everest summit in the first two days of the new mountaineering season which started on May 15. Appa Sherpa broke his own record for most climbs when he conquered the world's highest mountain for the 14th time. With her fourth climb, Lakpa Sherpa became the most frequent Everest among women. Likewise, 27-year-old Pemba Dorje Sherpa set a new world record for the fastest climb with a time of eight hours and 10 minutes. By the time we went to press, four climbers had perished on the slopes of Everest—three Koreans and a Japanese. A fifth climber, a Bulgarian, was missing.



Week in politics

May 14: Parties announce additional protests. May 15: Senior NC(D) leader Krishna Prasad Bhattarai says he is ready for the prime ministerial chair, should it come his way. May 16: Maoists renew their proposal for roundtable talks brokered by the UN, which will include the King, parties and civil society representatives; on the same day, former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba says it was time the country went for the constituent assembly. May 17: King meets 353 civil society representatives in Rajanikunj, Gokarna. May 18: United

States says the King and parties should sit for talks to patch up differences. May 19: King meets five-party leaders jointly in Nagarjun Palace. May 20: King meets CPN(UML) General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal for two hours at Narayanhity; outgoing prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa says it is now up to the parties to resolve the crisis. May 21: King meets Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala at Narayanhity.

Banda protests

There have been quite a few protests over the effects of protests, bandas and block-

ades. But there was one unique protest in Chitwan that made headlines last week. Kantipur reported that 300 farmers in Chitwan dumped at least 500 quintals of their vegetable on the Mahendra Highway after the Maoists brought all cargo trucks to a grinding halt for five days in the area. The two-day five-party banda the week before was followed by a three-day Nepal banda last week, this one called by the Maoists. At least two taxis were bombed by suspected Maoists in the capital during the banda.

Foreign advice

Pakistan's Ambassador to Nepal Zamir Akram says Nepal can solve its own problems but then everybody should work together to find a solution.

Ambassador Akram has also said that Pakistan was expecting King Gyanendra to visit Islamabad. The invitation to the King was handed over at the last SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in January 2002.



HOW GREEN IS MY VALLEY: Parts of Kathmandu were flooded last week with the premonsoon rain

BY SURESH PRADHAN

Hopes were high when Surya Bahadur Thapa, the second prime minister appointed by King Gyanendra in as many years, stepped down on May 7 after 11 tumultuous months at the helm. Many in the political circle even speculated that Thapa had thrown in the towel at the prodding

of the King himself, who was apparently feeling the heat from agitating parties and the international community.

But it took 14 more days for the King and the parties to start talking. First, though, came the frantic rounds of consultations with everyone—from former prime ministers to diplomats to civil society representatives to Palace insiders.

The timing was interesting: the Nagarjun Durbar consultations with the parties last week took place a day after the U.S. State Department sounded alarm bells over Nepal's civil war, "rights abuses" and political deadlock. Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, on a visit to South Asia, emphasized democ-

racy, human rights and dialogue in Nepal while addressing a function in Dhaka.

The much-awaited Nagarjun consultations broke the ice and paved the way for more consultations between the monarch and the five party heads, who have been at loggerheads since October 4, 2002. A day after Nagarjun, the King held one-to-one talks with Madhav Kumar Nepal, the CPN(UML) general secretary, for nearly two hours.

While Nepal was careful not to divulge all the details of the talks, he stressed that the King was anxious to resolve the stalemate. Most fundamentally, the meeting marked the beginning of renewed rounds of consultations with party leaders. After Nepal, it was Koirala.

ON TENTERHOOKS



WHAT'S THE GOOD NEWS?

By agreeing to the parties' core demand of meeting them all together, the Nagarjun consultations helped the parties and the King to take the first important step towards a possible reconciliation.

After Nagarjun, Nepal and Koirala seemed to have no qualms about meeting the King separately in the days that followed, a remarkable shift in their position. But on concrete terms, last week's parleys made little headway. "The King is keen to resolve the crisis," Koirala said on Friday after he met the King, "but I cannot say anything conclusive until the results are there for all of us to see." Koirala told reporters outside Narayanhity, "We are for the reinstatement of the House to restore people's power...and I am neither happy nor disappointed."

Meanwhile, Koirala's close aides suggest that the leader was "not happy at all" at the outcome of Friday's talks with the King. "He looked very ponderous and didn't share much with us as to what ex-

actly had transpired between him and the King at the Palace," a Koirala aide told Nation. He said that Koirala apparently had strong reservations over what the King had said during the talks. While it is still not clear what rankles Koirala, the aide says Koirala left Narayanhity with these remarks, "Your Majesty, I am leaving with some reservations, and I am not going to make any comments."

In the meantime, the standing committee of the CPN(UML) decided on Friday to go ahead with the street demonstrations. "All the parties should move ahead according to the Constitution and a political resolution should be explored to take along even the Maoists," Nepal told reporters on Thursday when asked to discuss the content of his talks with the King.

Clearly, the parties have adopted a two-pronged approach: intensify street demos to put pressure on the monarch and, at the same time, keep holding negotiations with the monarch to have him restore the dissolved House of Representatives and, that way, reclaim the achievements of the 1990's Jana Andolan.

Whatever the differences between the five-party leaders and the Palace, many—and most importantly, the general public sick and tired of the never-ending series of street demos and agitations and Nepal bandas—have taken the development very positively. One such person is former finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat. "The King's observations are very positive," he argues in a newspaper article. "His

The Palace-parties standoff may take some time to resolve, especially the issue of where the sovereignty lies

wish to act only in a constitutional manner is beyond question. But the problem is—the present imbroglio originated from the past acts for which there existed no constitutional provision."

The arguments and counter-arguments could go on and on. "But the wisest decision," says Narayan Man Bijukchhe, leader of the Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party "would be to put the King among the people ... a unity between the parties and the Palace is the need of the hour. That's why we are requesting the King to understand this, so that we can tackle the Maoist issue."

But for now, all indications are that the Palace-parties standoff may take some time to resolve, especially the most contentious issue of where the sovereignty lies. Until that issue is resolved, will the parties and the monarch find a common meeting point? Both realize that the Maoist insurgency continues to take a heavy toll on the national economy and security. **N**







Collateral Damage

The repercussion of bandas goes far beyond economics. While television footage of truckloads of okra being discarded by farmers in protest on our highways capture the level of damage to the national economy, what goes unreported are the small, micro-level effects on Nepal's most vulnerable citizens—women, children and old people

BY SUSHMA JOSHI

Cabin fever—the feeling of being cooped up inside a small space—is a common feeling during the bandas. Groups of men, restless from inactivity, walk, cycle or motorbike through the empty streets. The downward plunge of air pollutants, and the holiday feeling in the air, can lull an observer into thinking bandas are popular events.

But this can be misleading. The repercussion of bandas goes far beyond economics. While television footage of truckloads of okra being discarded by farmers in protest on our highways capture the level of damage to the national economy, what goes unreported are the small, micro-level effects on Nepal's most vulnerable citizens—women, children and old people.

Tika Pradhan of Bhojpur sells her vegetables at the Handigaon vegetable market every evening. For the three days during last week's banda, she was only able to sell the leftover vegetables she bought on Monday morning. "I sell veg-

etables so that I don't have to ask my husband for money to spend," she says. Although her husband's earnings as a plumber will tide over their household expenses, she will get hit where it hurts the most—her independence.

Rammaya Tamang is even less lucky. A divorced mother of three teenagers, only one of whom is employed, Tamang also sells fruits and vegetables to make a living at Bishalnagar Chowk. For her, the three days of lost time mean not just a loss of earnings, but an increase of workload in private homes where she has to do menial tasks to make ends meet. Tamang pre-

CAMPUS POLITICS

Your Freedom Ends Where My Nose Begins

BY BISWAS BARAL

Our dingy psychology classroom perched atop the old building of Ghantaghar barely remains open these days. As if we had not had enough bandas and on-campus rioting to mar our studies, some students had locked all the rooms in the campus for supposedly getting poor grades in their practicals.

Due to this 'start-stop' timetable, most students are visibly despondent. All kinds of views are rife in our small circle. Some, while morally supporting the protestors, are against the disruption of their studies; some feel the cause of democracy is much greater than their education; while still others remain vehemently against any kind of disruption in studies and, naturally, against protests or bandas.

Last week, we could only have one class out of the seven scheduled. As it is, even without disruptions, the teachers are hard pressed to finish their courses on time. To add to our woes, we have yet to start our practicals—the most tedious of tasks at the best of times. Every single student of psychology has to go through five long sessions (lasting anywhere



GROUND ZERO: Tri-Chandra College is perhaps the nervecenter of Kathmandu's student politics

between two to two and a half hours) of practicals where a faculty evaluates the student's classroom presentation of a "subject"—how they respond to an event or idea.

To say that in Tri-Chandra College, a hub for student politics and riots, the campus authorities are quick to dismiss all classes at the sight of a hurled brick will perhaps not be an overstatement. So while most students still support the movement against "regression," there are many who are beginning to have second thoughts about the intent of the student leaders, who inadvertently—or deliberately,

at other times—end up disrupting classes, by pelting stones, when they are not organizing bandas.

Dipendra Subedi, a B.A. second-year student, remains deeply suspicious of the intent of the political parties. He says, "As I see it, they are rebels without a cause. Even if democracy is restored, what can we expect of them? They could let us study, at the least."

Another B.A. second-year student in St. Xavier's College is worried that she many not finish her field work which she says has been delayed with the ever-increasing number of bandas and chakka jams. "What am I supposed to do?"

I neither support nor oppose the political parties. I just want them not to hamper my work," she complains, voicing a common refrain heard among many nonpartisan students.

Still, most of my friends and classmates seem to support the movement against "regression" but like the student from St. Xavier's College they believe that the goal can be achieved without calling for bandas and, by keeping education separate from politics.

It's no fun when you have to complete most of the courses at home, all by yourself. Our teachers aren't feeling any better either. When one of them, who takes classes at Padma Kanya Campus before she heads to our college, failed to turn up for the third consecutive day recently, we fired angry queries at her. "What can I do," she replied, "I leave my classes at Padma Kanya early, but I am held up by the riots in Bag Bazaar every time, and hence I end up being late. Some days, the police completely stop us from entering the Ratnapark area. I have no choice but to head home."

I do support the campaign for the restoration of democracy and, so do most of my friends. But in this noble quest, let us not be unduly bullied. To me, democracy is as much about voicing your opinion as it is about respecting others' right to dissent. **N**

(Baral is a B.A. Third Year student at Tri-Chandra College)

fers the autonomy of her being her own employer and will have to do overtime in order to recuperate her losses.

Women, who are often at the forefront of small and informal businesses, also have to deal with the potential for violence on banda days. "I was sitting inside when I saw these five boys from the five-party alliance come and peer inside. They called to see if anyone was there, but I hid inside. They didn't see me, so they just pulled my shutter down and went away. I waited for a while, then opened my shop again," says Renuka Thapa, who is from Dhading.

Her cold store in Kamalpokhari has barely been open for four months. She struggles to meet the monthly rent of Rs. 5,000 and Rs. 3,000 on electricity bills incurred from the use of two refrigerators. She says there is less to fear in a Maoist banda because the Maoists would at least not dare to openly shut her down.

Besides the loss of livelihood and fear of violence, women also lose their mobility. "I can't do anything," says Sangita Sharma, a bright and vivacious 25-year-old, for whom the banda means confinement at home. Recently married and with a six-month-old infant, Sharma is dis-

couraged from leaving home by in-laws who fear for her safety. Her music lessons, which she takes in order to prepare for her examinations at Allahbad University, are suspended. With the increasing incidents of motorbikes and cars being vandalized and set on fire during bandas, women are rarely seen using them during these times.

Children are also badly hit by bandas. Parents, fearing for their children's safety, keep them at home. Those who can afford to send their children to study abroad are doing so in increasing numbers. India, with its proximity and relative affordability, remains a popular destination.

Binay Pandey, after a lot of soul-searching, finally sent his eight-year-old son Alok to a school in Delhi. Although he and his wife both miss their son, they feel it was important to send the child away so that his academics remain untroubled by political violence and instability. "He started to follow me around at night, asking me if I had locked the doors. An eight-year-old child should not have to carry around that much fear," says his mother.

Besides education, people seeking medical care are also inconvenienced. The hardest-hit are older people, who are often cut off from urgent medical care for days. A banda can also prove fatal to women giving birth, as was seen in a recently documented case in Pokhara. And with the Maoists burning an ambulance during a recent banda, it is clear that even vehicles clearly marked with signs of emergency and medical care are not immune to violence.

Although strikes are common in other parts of the world, the "banda"—an event where organizers assume they have the moral right to threaten dissenters, vandalize property and shut down institutions that disagree with them—seems culturally specific to Nepal and other South Asian countries.

Forms of civil protest reflect the culture of a country. In Nepal, where women and children remain some of the poorest and most marginalized citizens of the world, even the banda organized by political groups claiming to represent citizens fail them in significant and sometimes lethal ways. **N**



EMERGENCY MEASURES: Getting to the hospital during bandas can be more than a hassle



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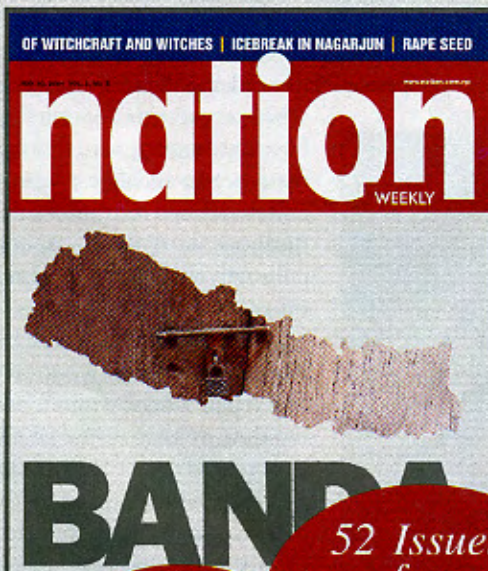
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BEST 5 photos

At the first-ever press photo exhibition organized by the National Forum of Photojournalists last month, viewers selected the five best pictures. Nation Weekly photojournalist Sagar Shrestha's "Victims of Conflict" taken three years ago in the village of Bichaur in Lamjung received the highest number of votes (864). Kantipur's Chandrashekhhar Karki (495 votes) and Gopal Chitrakar (368) finished second and third. A total of 102 pictures by 64 photographers were put on display at Nepal Art Council Gallery. **N**



By Gopal Chitrakar

5



By Ashok Tuladhar

4

ALL'S NOT WELL IN MAO-LAND

In Rukum, one administrative chief is only 20-years old but rules 35 villages. Sangam says he was elected district chief in a ballot. All the candidates, however were believed to have links to the Maoists. This, after all, is the Maoist heartland; there is no political opposition

**BY BINAJ GURUBACHARYA
IN MUSIKOT**

In the mountains of Mid West, a full-blown Maoist uprising is gaining ground. The present-day Nepal, overall, seems to offer laboratory conditions for a revolution: widespread poverty, an undemocratic government perceived as remote and corrupt, and a feudal system run by the handful of rich.

This reporter, who trekked into the rebel heartland and spent a week in the villages and the besieged district capital, heard voices both for and against the Maoists. Some deplored the guerrillas' violent intolerance of criticism, and their attempts to impose communist ideology on the farmers. Teachers spoke of rebels entering their classrooms to lecture pupils. There were accounts of fighters dragging opponents from their homes and killing them.

"If there were free elections today and the Maoists came without their guns, they would lose by a big margin," says Harka Bahadur Chhetri, 41, a teacher who was repeatedly stabbed in front of his family for criticizing the rebels.

But people also conceded the rebels have done much for the villages under their control. They said they have banned polygamy, child marriage, alcohol and witchcraft. They have seized farms and redistributed the land among the poor

and mediated disputes among farmers and villagers. In the village of Dupai, bright posters depicting Mao and the elusive leader, Prachanda, were pasted on a wall by the school.

In Rukum, about 250 miles west of Katmandu, many Maoist-built mountain

plotted by the landlords who were getting richer and fatter everyday," says Bhim Bahadur Dangi, 45.

A farmer, he joined the Maoist rebellion at its beginning eight years ago and today he is administrative chief of nine villages in the Arma area of Rukum. "We have taken the farms from these landlords and distributed them to the people who actually work on them. We are teaching them how to get maximum production out of their farms," he says.

Many farmers say they support the revolution simply to give their children a better life. They see technology coming to neighboring countries, and their government failing to do the same for them. In Rukum, one administrative chief is only 20-years old but rules 35 villages. Sangam says he was elected district chief in a ballot.

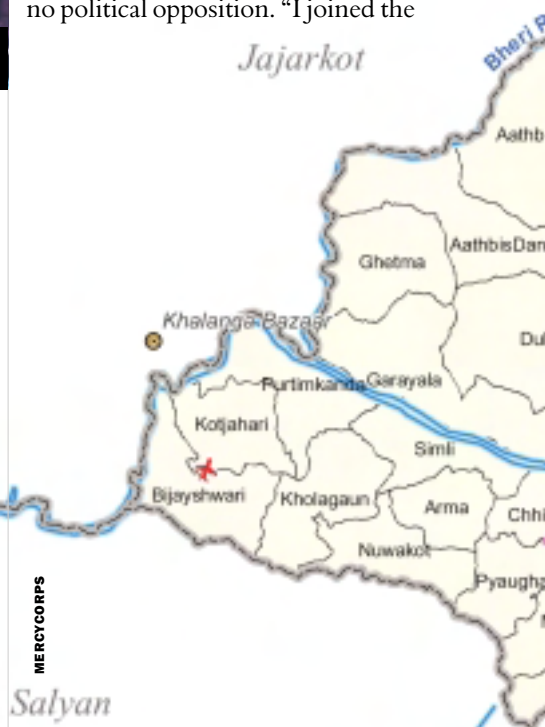
However, all the candidates were believed to have links to the Maoists; it is after all the Maoist heartland, there is no political opposition. "I joined the



THE GREAT DIVIDE: Government and Maoist negotiators shake hands during the peace talks



trails and concrete bridges across streams were evident. So were dug canals and pipes brought in by the Maoists to channel water to many villages. "The poor farmers were getting poorer and ex-



Maoist movement because I wanted to free our people,” Sangam says. He became a fighter at 15 and took part in several raids, one of them two years ago in which 32 police officers were killed and 31 captured and freed after a month. Sangam was shot in the hands.

In another village, Pipal, a Maoist official Ganesh Man Pun outlined ambitious goals of building roads, bridges, hydroelectric plants and schools. “Our aim is to have an autonomous people’s government where people seize the power for themselves,” says Pun. Rukum, a district of beautiful mountains and valleys, is the Maoists’ de facto capital. They patrol with guns and grenades as farmers mostly tend their vegetable crops. The region’s capital is Musikot, whose 6,000 people live behind a fence and, after nightfall, under curfew.

The 500 soldiers and 300 policemen rarely venture beyond the fence. “We have full security inside the district headquarters, but outside the fence we have

a big security problem,” acknowledges Chet Prasad Upreti, Musikot’s chief district administrator. The town is besieged. The only way around rebel roadblocks is by air. Food stocks are diminishing.

“We have grains to last a few more days and after that we are all going to starve,” said Dil Ghimire, who runs a small hostel in Musikot. The government tried airlifting grain, but the Maoists burned down the storage shed. Among the refugees living in Musikot is Nayan Singh Damai, 65. He says he was attacked en route to a political rally in 1998 and injured so badly that he lost a leg. Doctors in Katmandu gave him an artificial leg, but the Maoists would kill him if he tried to make the four-hour walk to his village, so his wife visits him twice a year, he says.

“My only offense was I had different political beliefs” says Chhetri. The rebels have their own courts, judges, tax system and schools. Teachers like Ghimire give away five percent of their monthly income to the Maoists.

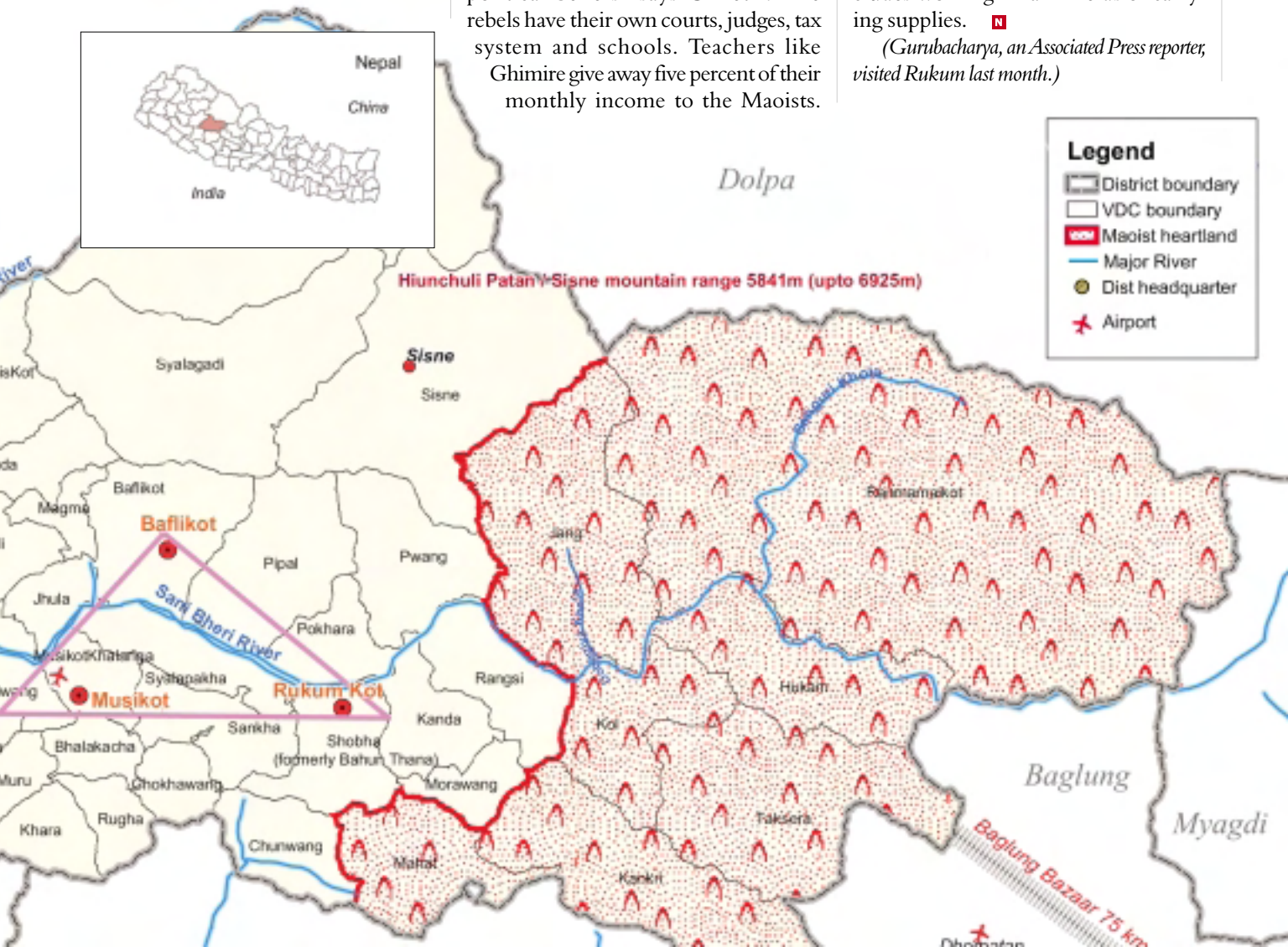
Farmers and businessmen pay according to their assets.

The rebels say defendants facing their courts have the right to attorneys, who have no legal education and are usually picked by the rebels. A seven-member jury of villagers must reach a unanimous verdict. Defendants are tried in an open-air courtyard, facing a judge at a desk and jurors seated on a mat.

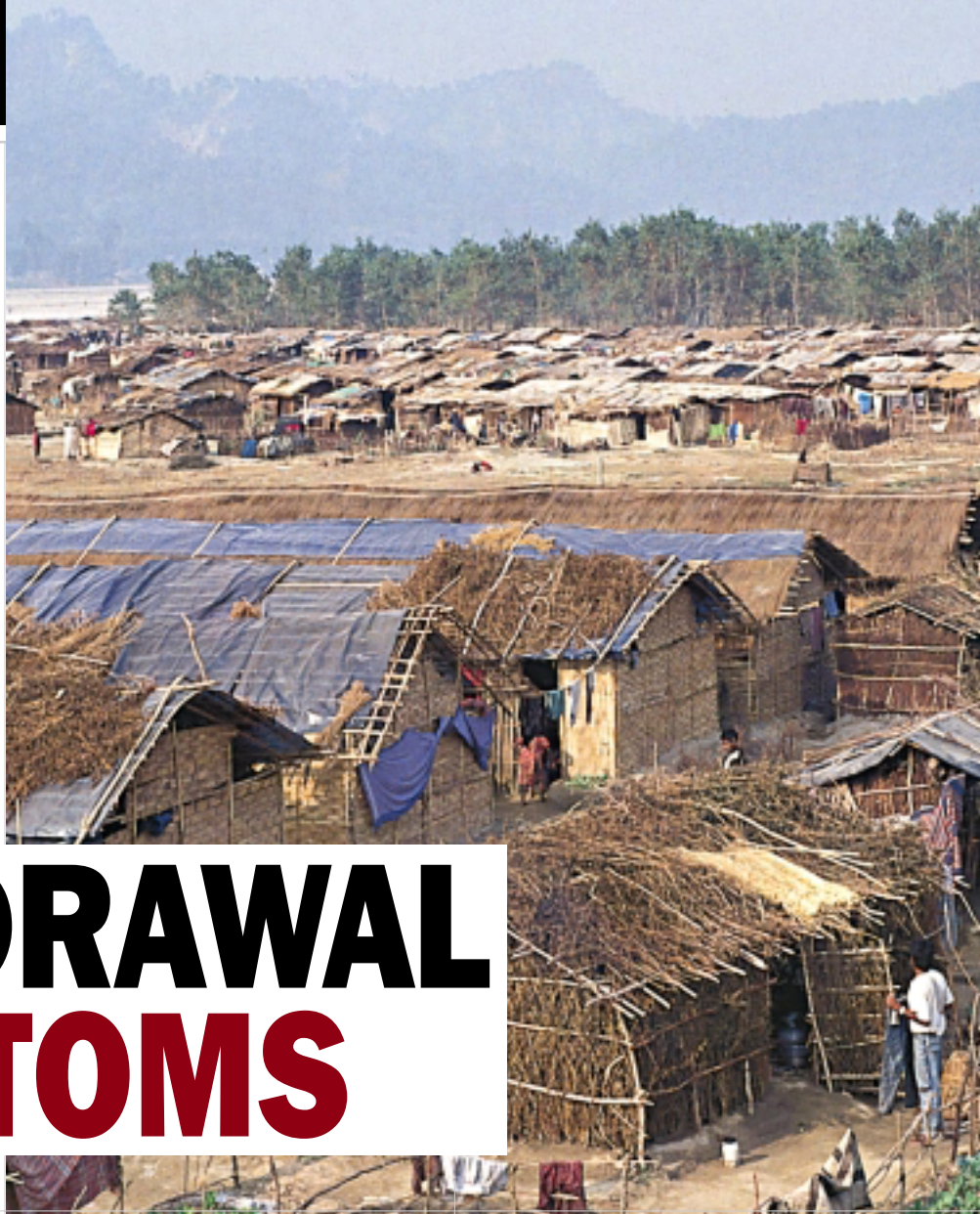
“There will be a day when all of Nepal will follow this system,” says Rupesh Mainali, chief of the rebels’ law and justice department. A woman who killed another woman brought home by her husband is given a seven-year sentence; a rapist is serving three years. Their prison is a house seized by the rebels from a landlord who had to flee to the district capital. Their punishment includes working in farm fields or carrying supplies. **N**

(Gurubacharya, an Associated Press reporter, visited Rukum last month.)

Teachers like Ghimire give away five percent of their monthly income to the Maoists.



UNHCR has made it clear through a series of statements from its headquarters in Geneva, and in Katmandu that come what may, any likely extension of its December 2005 deadline for the pullout from the camps may be stretched by six months at most. But refugee leaders are apprehensive about the proposed pullout



WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

**BY JOHN NARAYAN PARAJULI
IN DAMAK**

As the hope of a negotiated settlement with Bhutan and repatriation of refugees fades, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has unveiled a phase-out plan that some insiders say was long overdue.

UNHCR will phase down its role in the Bhutanese refugee camps to protection level alone, which UN officials insist is UNHCR's true mandate in protracted refugee crises. The agency will then only be responsible for extremely vulnerable cases (like cases of sexual and gender-based violence) where the refugees cannot return home. UNHCR has already made it clear through a series of statements from its headquarters in Geneva, and in Katmandu that come what may, any likely extension of its December 2005 deadline for the pullout from the camps may be stretched by six months at most.

Does it then imply the end of the refugee movement for repatriation? No, says S. B. Subba, a refugee leader, "We will still re-group and we will still be agitating for a dignified repatriation." Refugee leaders say the UNHCR withdrawal will seriously hurt the refugees.

The agency officials, however, insist their plan is foolproof and will provide a durable solution to the refugee stalemate that dates back to the early 1990s. Though UNHCR still hopes that bona fide refugees will get repatriated by the 2005 deadline, there are clear hints that it considers local integration a viable option. This means that the ethnic Nepalis in the camps will probably be assimilated into the larger society outside the camp. Should that happen, Nepal will likely witness a very visible addition to its population—in one region, at one time.

The logic behind the seemingly ambitious pullout plan is simple enough,

according to officials: just as UNHCR phases out from the care and assistance part of the refugee operation, other bilateral donors like GTZ, JICA, USAID and DANIDA will step in, including other UN agencies.

"We are not going to leave a vacuum behind," says a UNHCR official. "Even if we fail to engage donors directly, we're hopeful that the host government would do the 'burden-sharing.' We are also negotiating with the government in this regard. Yes, it's true that we assist and render protection to refugees, but only in cases where the governments are unable to."

But refugee leaders fear that it may not turn out to be as simple as officials make it sound. They express deep concerns over the feasibility of the proposed transition. Their apprehension: other agencies just don't have the all-round expertise of UNHCR in handling refugees. "It doesn't seem quite feasible given



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the different field of expertise they (UNHCR) possess,” says Subba, chairman of the Bhutanese Refugee Representatives Repatriation Committee (BRRRC).

UNHCR must stay, he insists. “Bilateral donors cannot be a substitute to UNHCR nor can the UN agency unprecedentedly delegate its mandate.” Apart from legal protection, the refugees in the camps receive a wide range of assistance from the UN agency like daily ration, clothes, and materials to build homes, medical aid and education. As a part of phase-down, these facilities will be scrapped.

Last year, refugees had to face serious problems of readjustments when UNHCR shut down child play centers and kindergartens, deleted turmeric powder from the ration list and reduced funding for higher secondary education. UNHCR says it spends \$120 per refugee annually in the camps.

Much like the refugee leaders, some foreign diplomats in Kathmandu whose interest and consent the agency is counting on, do not appear quite enthusiastic about the UN pullout. A senior U.S. diplomat earlier this month expressed disbelief (in an email message to this reporter) over directly involving bilateral donors in the transition of the assis-

tance. “...I don’t believe USAID or any other bilateral donors will be involved in the transition of assistance from UNHCR—they plan to continue assistance programs through UN agencies.”

The diplomats also expressed uncertainty over the time-frame of the transition process. “...I don’t know when UNHCR actually intends to begin the phase out, although I assume we will be briefed once they have a concrete plan.”

The news of phase-out and transition has already created a sense of panic among refugees here. Sources say the newly elected Camp Secretaries and Members have threatened to resign en masse as a symbolic protest.

It’s been an interesting policy shift for the UN refugee agency. From “We wouldn’t pull out of the camps till a durable solution is found” six months ago to a drastically changed—“We might” and now “We will.” It all started last fall.

When laying out his plan for Bhutanese refugees before an executive committee meeting in Geneva on 29 September 2003, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Rudd Lubbers had said that his office would promote self-reliance projects to facilitate local integration and gradual phasing-out of UNHCR’s direct involvement.

“I have decided to take three key measures,” Lubbers said, “first, since the Nepalese government has offered to settle those [refugees] willing to remain, and grant them citizenship, my office will promote self-reliance projects to facilitate their [local] integration. Second, my office will support resettlement initiatives for vulnerable cases. Third...we will not promote returns.”

The funds saved from the phase-out here is likely to be directed to Iraq, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, all troubled spots. In a statement issued in March, the UNHCR said it was “downsizing its assistance” for Bhutanese refugees as it has “other areas to focus on.”

Although observers here agree that the self-reliance projects might be the best option for a dignified life, in light of the refugee stalemate, they however say that a graceful homeward journey might become more difficult once the camps have been dismantled.

With TIKU GAUCHAN in Kathmandu 



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RAPE SEED

As the west rejects genetically modified crops, they are being dumped in the South. This is one such story. Of how canola, the Canadian oilseed, is invading our own Khokana, once famous for its mustard presses

BY SAMUEL THOMAS

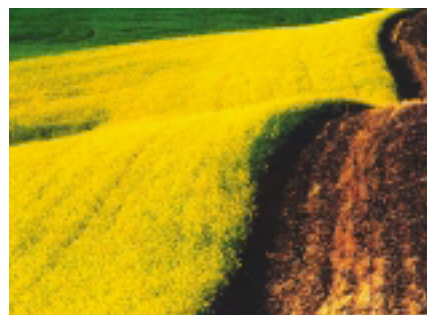
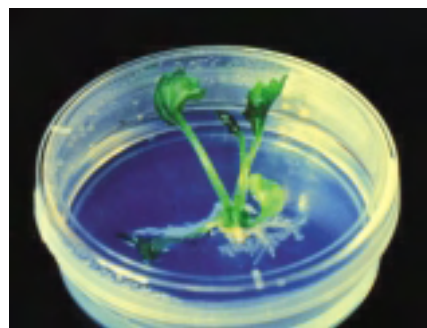
Khokana is the ancient town on the outskirts of Kathmandu Valley known for its traditional mustard presses. The unrefined, smoky-thick mustard oil is used for just about all purposes—cooking, lighting lamps at homes, temples and religious events, massaging newborns and their mothers. Only for some four years now, oilseed (canola, rapeseed or mustard) has been coming from Canada. The same goes for presses elsewhere in the Valley.

Canada is the third-largest producer of genetically modified (GM) crops after the United States and Argentina. Genetically modified refers to any organism in which the genetic material has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally. By 2002, it was estimated that over two-thirds of Canadian canola was genetically modified or transgenic. A record high in exports was reached in 2001-2002 after GM was introduced widely. The bulk of it was being dumped on the unsuspecting (and technologically unable to detect GM or lacking provisions to block) South, because Europe had shut the doors to GM produce by 1997 and other countries discriminated against GM produce. GM crops form a significant part of the international trade in corn, soybeans and canola. Canada's canola exports have grown after the introduction of GM varieties and today account for more than 40 percent of world exports.

Back in Canada, the country of origin, there has been an informed public debate on GM. The National Farmers Union (NFU) believes all Canadians—farmers and non-farmers alike—must engage in an informed debate on the genetic modi-

fication of food. And that after that debate, citizens—not the corporations that promote these products—must decide whether to accept or reject GM food.

Clearly, in Nepal, where small farmers and their dependants form the bulk of the population, such matters cannot



INSIDIOUS ALCHEMY: Canola saplings in petri-dishes bloom in lush Canadian fields before the harvests head to the markets

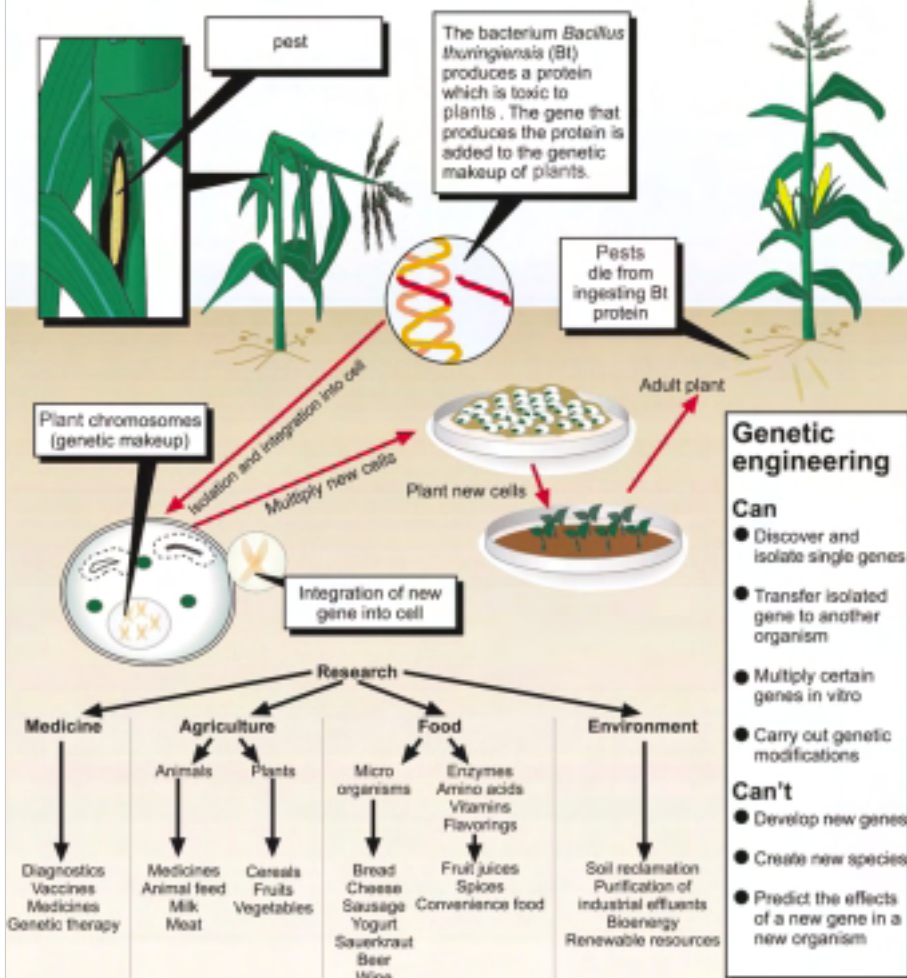
be left to commodity traders. Most disturbing is the potential for genetic pollution—transgenics finding their way into conventional seed through pollen or accidental seed mixing. An Agriculture Canada study in June 2003 confirmed what canola farmers had been saying for years: “that GM canola was popping up where it isn’t planted and isn’t wanted.” A secret briefing to the Canadian government in November 2003 (obtained under the Right to Information Act) said that cross-contamination was now “irreversible.”

The NFU policy also talks about the potential risks to human and ecological health. There has not been a systematic, scientific investigation of the health effects of GM foods. There are also many unanswered questions about the environmental risks of GM crops and livestock. Genetic modification threatens to unbalance the biosphere, create ‘super-weeds,’ endanger beneficial insects, and erode biodiversity.

Millers in Khokana say local mustard production is not enough. But what about customer preference for traditionally pressed oil? “We mix the two, because rapeseed that comes from elsewhere does not have the flavor of Nepali mustard, although the seeds are larger and contain more oil,” says a miller in Khokana. It is also cheaper than locally produced mustard. “All the big companies are also using imported oilseed,” he adds.

What this can do to farmers and consumers is clear from the Indian experience. From being a net exporter of oilseeds in 1994-95 (production: 22 million tons), India was importing over five million tons of edible oils by 2002 (roughly 50 per cent of domestic requirement), costing the exchequer over IRs. 12,000crore. It put farmers out of business and destroyed the country’s self-sufficiency in oilseed production. This is something Nepali farmers and consumers can ill afford. Here, prices of cooking oil (soy and mustard) have doubled in the last two years, a price rise unmatched in any other food item. The reasons are obvious—the government is keen on supporting foreign producers and traders, not local farmers and the consumer.

How genetic engineering works



The case against GM produce here is so obvious that it does not need to be argued. One, chances are that transgenic varieties of canola have contaminated our crops. Two, chances are that a substantial portion of the oil here is now from GM seed. Three, chances are that a lot of our farmers have stopped growing for the local markets because of the crippling effects of western farm subsidies that allow for dumping in faraway Nepal, essentially affecting the market for non-GM organic produce, destroying local production capacities and self-sufficiency.

Given Nepal's fragile ecosystems and farming systems, citizens need to decide whether they want GM food or not. The idea is not to toss evidence at Nepal, but to allow Nepal to build its own evidence and have a public debate before deciding. Given the health and environmental risks it is only fitting that relevant Canadian authorities—dealing with farming and export—explain the presence by stealth of GM produce in Nepal. If indeed transgenic canola has contaminated the environment, they must pay for the clean up costs. If the government of Canada is answerable to its people, it must answer also to the people of Nepal.

Last month, China, one of the biggest markets for Canadian canola, shut its doors. The head of the Chinese agency that oversees the genetically modified crop, Shi Yanquan, declared that genetically modified products would not enter China without a safety certificate.

New EU rules on labeling and tracing of genetically modified foods came into effect on 18 April 2004. The rules, described by the EU as the toughest GM food regulations in the world, require food and animal feed to be labeled if they contain at least 0.9 percent of GM ingredients, essentially giving consumers the choice. A survey of EU customers showed that 70 percent do not want GM food. Do we?

(Thomas works at IUCN. The views expressed are his.) **N**

SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL: How long can oil-processing families in Khokana hold on to their traditional lifestyles?



Worldly-wise Compassion

A nun-school prepares its students for the real world

BY TIKU GAUCHAN

Fifteen-year-old Choying Sangmo says she wants to be a doctor. That sort of a statement might not stand out for its originality given that most kids in Kathmandu seem to routinely blurt out that they want to be either engineers or doctors. But unlike urban children who can, and do become doctors with proper guidance, Sangmo's case is a little different. Had Sangmo not been brought to Kathmandu by her aunt from her native Mustang and enrolled at the Arya Tara School in Samakhusi, her dreams of becoming a doctor would most likely have remained a pipe dream.

Arya Tara takes in girls from poor families, ordains them as nuns and provides them with both a Buddhist and a secular education: the girls, besides engaging with Buddhist texts, also get schooled in the SLC curriculum. The school was founded by Ani Choying, a renowned nun-singer who believes that nuns need to get a practical education if they are to live well-rounded lives. Buddhism teaches compassionate action, but without an education in some sort of a vocation, it's hard to translate compassion into action. When the girls enroll, they are made to take a vow that after finishing their formal education, at whatever level, they'll head back to their villages and use the skills learned to help their fellow human beings.

Many of the girls at Arya Tara have experienced firsthand the trials of living in a poverty-stricken environment and the attendant problems that come with such a life. Seven-year-old Drolma Tsering from Sikkim, the youngest nun at the school, lived with an alcoholic father until her uncle decided to bring her to Kathmandu. Chimey Lhamo, who was abandoned at birth, was later brought to

the school by her foster mother after she herself decided to become a nun.

Arya Tara currently has 27 students living there as boarders. The school will in a few months shift to its permanent location in Pharping, where the building's construction is almost complete. And on the cards: the possibility of the enrollment shooting up to 150 full-time students.

How can a non-profit run school raise the money to finance such a venture? The answer lies in founder Ani Choying's voice, or more specifically her singing. Choying chants hymns and sings at benefit concerts the world over. She's performed at the Smithsonian Folk Festival in Washington D.C., at the sixth world music festival in Barcelona, and in places like the UN headquarters in New York. Her album, "Cho," that she made with guitarist Steve Tibbets in 1997, received rave reviews in magazines like *Guitar Player*, and the *Philadelphia Enquirer*



Choying Sangmo

daily. The proceeds from Ani Choying's concert ticket sales and CD sales account for more than 80 percent of the school's budget; the rest comes from donors.

While the mission to give nuns a secular education is a noble aim, carrying out such a task isn't all that easy. When you have 27 students whose ages range from seven to 23, and whose formal learning

experiences are varied, you have to get creative with your class sizing and grouping. The students are grouped into three classes: junior, intermediate and senior. Junior classes have students who would normally be attending grades 1 to 3, intermediate: 4 to 5, and senior: 6 to 8.

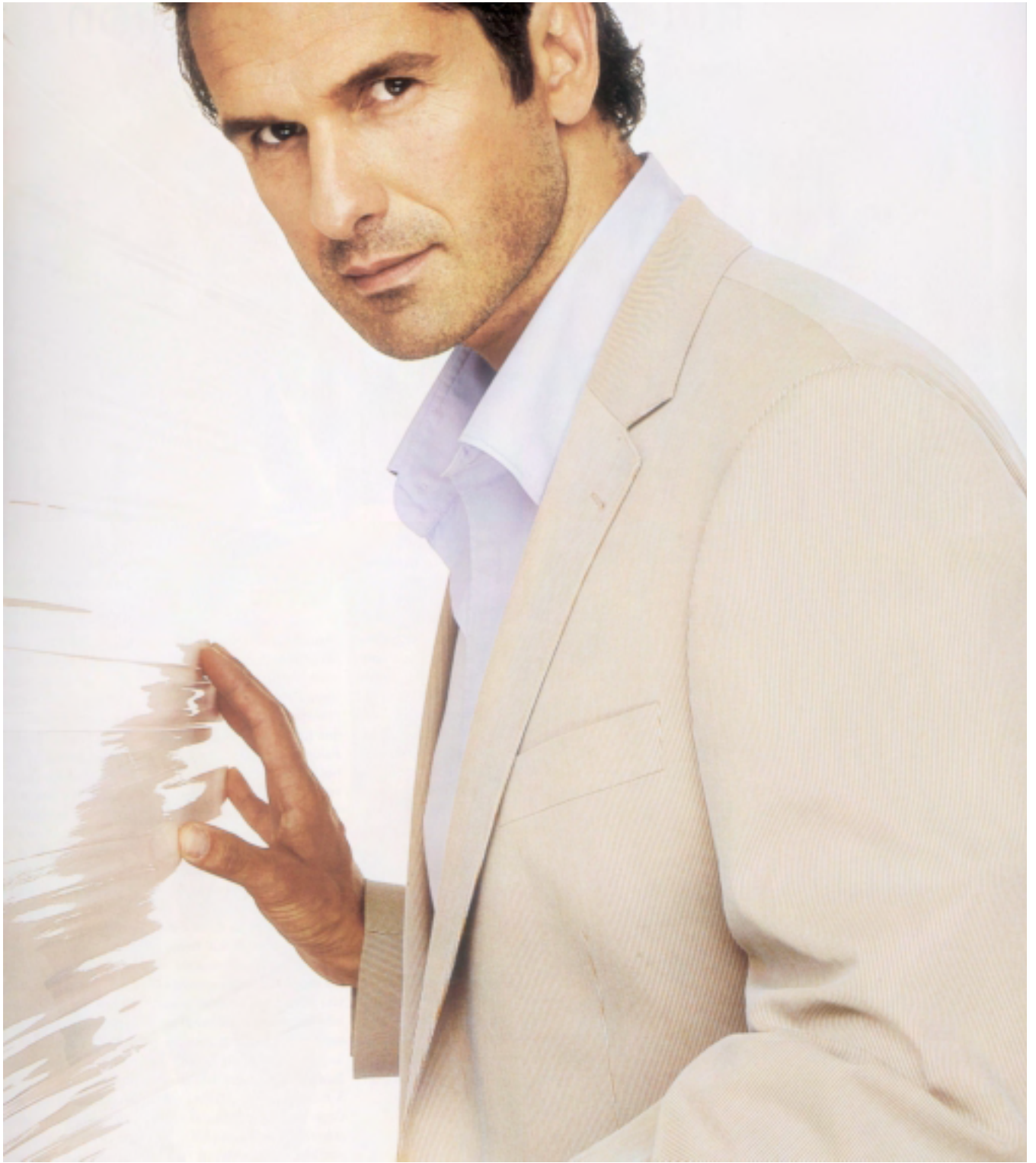
Four full-time teachers take turns teaching the nuns in classes with fluid boundaries separating the age groups. Within the span of the 45-minutes allotted for the subject being taught, the teachers have to shift their methods to pitch their lectures sometimes to the younger section and sometimes to the older group.

From time to time foreigners who want to volunteer their services help ease the workload. Just recently, two Germans, Sabine Thoma and Kay Ehrbar, taught the children for three months before heading back home. The volunteer teachers teach supplementary classes like art, geography, health care and even knitting and self defense.

Some of them help with the administration too. Mera Thompson, a Canadian, has taken on the role of an all-in-one coordinator. She takes care of the school's accounts, subs in for sick teachers, and helps with the fundraising. Thompson, who used to be a reporter for the South China Morning Post and *Agence France*

Presse, got involved with the school after meeting Ani Choying during one of Choying's concerts in Kathmandu.

Ani Choying is definitely the center that keeps the school going, and the main reason for volunteers like Thompson and even full-fledged nuns like Tserab Sangmo showing up in her school. Tserab Sangmo, a 23-year-old political science graduate from Singamari, Darjeeling, takes lessons in Tibetan and Dharma translation at the Arya Tara. Tserab Sangmo is actually viewed by many to be the seventh incarnation of a Tibetan Lama, Khandoma. Just like many of the younger nuns at Arya Tara, she too plans to head back to her community to help her people after she's done with school. Such an army of nuns, from the initiates to a Lama incarnate looking to give back to their communities, should keep the good karma going a long way. **N**



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Tell Me A Story

Maithili storytelling culture is still vibrant, primarily because women storytellers have kept up the tradition

BY SATISH JUNG SHAHI

Joseph Campbell, celebrated mythologist and storyteller, once said that, “unless the symbols and meta-

phors of myths are kept alive by constant recreation through the arts, the life just slips away from them.” This is especially true of myths and folktales like the ones told by Maithili women,

The Jackal and the Eagle (A Maithili Tale)

Jackal and eagle, two friends lived near a riverbank. There was a *pakhar* tree near the bank, and the eagle lived in its nest on the treetop while the jackal lived near the tree’s base. Every year in Bhadau, during the Jitiya festival, all the women from the neighboring village who wanted a son, would go on a fast and bring ritual offerings of dried peas and mustard *peena*, which they placed on the riverbank. One year, the jackal and eagle, who had been watching the women performing the pujas every year, decided to ape the womenfolk and participate in a Jitiya ritual of their own. So the animals fasted and then tired, went to sleep. While the eagle kept his fast, the jackal got hungry and in desperation, bit off chunks from the corpse of a *tehllya* (oil seller) who was being cremated near the riverbank. Years later, after both the animals died they were reborn as women. The jackal became Lilawati, who got married to a rich but uneducated man, while the eagle became Silawati, who got married to a poor but educated man. Silawati and Lilawati both had many children but all of Lilawati’s children somehow died. Jealous of Silawati’s good fortune, Lilawati hired a butcher to kill

Silawati’s children. Since both the women now didn’t have any children, they found themselves undertaking fasts during the next Jitiya festival. Lord Shiva, who had seen the murders, brought back to life Silawati’s children at the end of her fast. This enraged Lilawati even more, and she called a panchyat, where she accused Silawati of being a witch. She said that Silawati had used witchcraft to both kill her children and to bring her own children back to life. As proof, Lilawati said that she had killed Silawati’s children. Silawati, however, won the case because the panchyat decided that her children got back their lives not through witchery but because of her devotion during the Jitiya festival. Furthermore, Lilawati’s admission of killing Silawati’s children backfired against her and was used as evidence to punish her.



The Maithili society is matriarchal, and the stories told by Maithili women highlight the primacy of women, the issues of self and society as understood by them and their rich earthy knowledge of life. As exemplified by the story above:

1. In most stories told by Maithili women, the protagonists are women
2. The animals of Tarai, who share living space with people, play a prominent part in Maithili stories.
3. The stories have a strong moral theme: don’t be greedy, don’t lie, respect your gods.
4. The importance of festivals and women’s participation in them is highlighted: the panchayat says that Silawati got back her children because of her devotion during the Jitiya festival.
5. Accusations of witchcraft, so prevalent in our villages, are shown for what they are: cooked-up charges.

which are perpetuated through an oral culture.

For ages, Maithili women’s folktales have been the repositories of Maithili culture, mores and lessons to live by. Today, Maithili storytelling is still vibrant, primarily because women storytellers have kept up the tradition. For the last six months, Coralynn Ann Davis, Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies and Anthropology at Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, has been traveling around Janakpur, documenting their tales. Davis’s work, which includes listening to, transcribing and analyzing over 140 stories told to her by a selected group of 10 women, is funded by a Fulbright Senior Research Grant.

“I had done my doctoral research on women development here, a decade ago,” says Davis, “and I had to find a way to come back to Nepal as I am so much in love with it.”

That love for Nepal may be a blessing. Davis, whose earlier works include, “Listen, Rama’s Wife!” “Society and the Sacred in the Saamaa-Chakeba Festival of Nepal’s Eastern Tarai,” and “Feminist Tigers and Patriarchal Lions,” will publish a book on Maithili stories based on her work. Given the pervasiveness of TV, movies and Bollywood music in the subcontinent, oral mythologies are hard pressed to keep up. And such work by people like Davis, at least help preserve the stories for future generations.

The Maithili women too have done their part to ensure that their storytelling will not become just a cultural vestige. They have transformed their stories to reflect issues of power, gender and the influences of the modern world. According to Davis, that’s a good sign. Even though it’s hard to tell how these storytellers will fare in the future, Davis says, “For now, Maithili story telling practice is alive and well.” **N**





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Of Witchcraft And Witches

It is a thin line to cross from believing that the stars rule our lives to being convinced that someone is the cause of our misfortunes. Our life is ruled by irrationality and we follow most of it without thinking twice

BY DEEPAK THAPA

Every now and then, newspapers carry reports about women and, sometimes, men being persecuted on charges of witchcraft. Generally, these victims tend to be living on their own, and so when the community rises up against them in a frenzy, there is no one to speak out for them. We in Kathmandu come to know of these incidents if the local stringer gets wind of it and files a story. Human rights organizations quickly come forward to document the case, but often nothing comes out of it and soon everyone goes back to their lives as if nothing had happened.

The immediate reaction in the press is usually of righteous indignation that such things should take place in this day and age, and this is vented occasionally by various writers in their columns. These writings often blame the ignorance of the villagers in believing that someone's 'evil eye' could be the source of their misfortune which could be anything from chronic illness and death of a person to something as mundane as the drying up of a cow's udders.

Here, one would like to ask how are these 'ignorant' perpetrators any different from the more 'enlightened' members of our society. Let's take one shining example. When Sher Bahadur Deuba became prime minister in July 2001, the country had lost its head of state in a gruesome massacre, the Maoist onslaught had renewed, and Girija Prasad Koirala had resigned as prime minister. Deuba had won the contest to lead his party's government. But what did he do? He left the country rudderless for five whole days while, as was reported then, his astrologers tried to figure out the most 'auspicious' time for him to take the oath of office. Whoever his astrologers are, they must have felt rather sheepish when 14 months later, Deuba was ignominiously booted out with the tag of 'incompetence' to haunt him forever. It is a different matter that his incompetence was in reference to his inability to hold elections in the promised time.

With such trendsetters, why should it shock us that some unfortunates consider a neighbor to be a witch? It is a thin line to cross from

believing that the stars rule our lives to being convinced that someone is the cause of our misfortunes. Our entire life is ruled by irrationality and we follow most of it without thinking twice. We conduct rituals while buying land or laying the foundation to a house, moving shop or going on a journey. There are injunctions of what we are to do or not to do: no whistling indoors, no sweeping after the sun goes down, no setting out on a journey on Saturday, and so on and on. Then there is the 'auspicious' time for everything: from naming a child to getting married to taking up office. People also develop individual idiosyncrasies. Wearing a particular kind of ring, or often rings, fasting on fixed times of the week, a penchant for doing things on particular days, all in the hope that it will ward off bad luck. These are examples of, to borrow Pakistani thinker Eqbal Ahmad's words, a mediaeval mindset at work.

One can well argue that these are questions of personal belief and undue comment is unwarranted. It certainly is, but it is this kind of behavior that is at the root of all superstition and can certainly not contribute positively to the health of a society. So long as we allow ourselves to be guided by the supernatural, we will constantly be looking over our shoulders even as we try to create a modern society driven by rational thought. For instance, the same newspapers which preach against superstitious belief continue to propagate superstition through its pages every day, i.e., through the horoscope columns. Practically every newspaper or magazine has an astrologer predicting what is in store for the readers that day, that week or that month, as the case



may be. Since there is specialist literature available for those who cannot do without knowing what they think the future holds for them, it fails reason why the general media should also be involved in soothsaying.

Having said all this, something interesting happened during the recent Indian elections that was reported in passing by the Indian press. Apparently, having arrived earlier, Sonia Gandhi had hung around the polling station waiting for a less 'inauspicious' time to cast her vote. Days later she was vaulted to the prime minister's chair. Now, that sure is one big boost for obscurantism. **N**

CITY: This Week

EVENTS

“Howlin’ Wolves”

“Rock ‘n Bark” is a CD produced by Animalnepal.org with music by some of Nepal’s top singers. Animalnepal.org aims to reach the youth through music from the CD as well as a series of concerts and events. The CD was launched on October 4, World Animal Day, at the Moksh in Jhamsikhel. Performing at the launch were Anil Singh, Bijay Lama and members of the popular rock band 1974 AD. The program was hosted by Jiggy Gaton and Maria Rai. The song “Aau Mili Gau” is a joint effort by 15 artists. Those of you interested in helping in anyway can call 9841-231284 or e-mail: animalnepal@hotmail.com

BY DINESH RAI



Young Asman Welcomes the Summer of 61. May 29

At 1905, Kantipath. Time: 6 p.m. Tickets: Rs. 750 (includes dinner and welcome drink). For information: 4471342. In aid of ASMAN’s charity



Fantastic Fridays

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Madonna Mania

From Like a Virgin to Vogue to True Blue. It’s Time For Some Maniacal Dancing! Venue: Club Platinum, Hotel Yak & Yeti. Date: May 29 Time: 1 p.m. Entrance: Rs. 200 (Boys) Rs. 100 (Girls)

Educational Fairs

8th Nepal Education & Book Fair 2004. Education and career section: Till May 25. Book section: till May 29. 11 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Bhrikuti Mandap Exhibition Hall. For information: 4260232

Fair and Lovely Educational & Career Fair: May 27-29, Close-up Inter College Musical Contest: May 27-30 at the Birendra International Convention Center. For information: 4258977, 4262267

Shangri-la Summer Special

Shambala Garden Lunch with swimming and soft drink. Rs. 500

FREE MOVIES

Movies at Lazimpat gallery café Time: 7 p.m. Admission Free
The Usual Suspects, May 25
Ocean Eleven, May 27

ART EXHIBITIONS

“Faces and Aspects of Nepal”: Mani Lama’s Photo Exhibition. Saturday Café, Boudha. Till June For information: 2073157

“Transformations:” An exhibition of paintings by Sushma Joshi. Gallery 9. May 25-31. For Information: 4428694

“Infinity’s Journey”: Mixed-media, collage and water-color paintings by Gaurav Shrestha, Binod Gupta, Ramesh K.C. and Suman Shrestha. Park Gallery, Lazimpat. May 28-June 7. For information: 4419353



“Finland in Nepal 1985-2004”: Photographs from Finland. Gallery Moksh. Till June 5. For information: 2113339

Discussions

Social Science Baha

A lecture by David Gellner on “Rebuilding Buddhism: Transnational Theravada Revivalism in Nepal.” . May 27, 5:30 p.m. at Baggikhana, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. For information: 5542544

Martin Chautari

Effects of the Indian Elections on Nepal. Tapan Bose and Yuvraj Ghimire. May 23, 3 p.m.

American Center, Gyaneshwore Time: 5:30 p.m.
The Candidate, May 27
Admission Free





Objection Overruled

Appointments of Anup Raj Sharma and Balram K.C., none of them Appellate Court judges, to the Supreme Court Bench have come under fire from the establishment. But Sharma and K.C. both have solid track records and the judiciary has to free itself from conventional trappings if it is to establish meritocracy in its ranks

BY JOGENDRA GHIMIRE

It's not just the country's executive, or absence of one, that is in the news. Recently, there has been some controversy over the appointment of two senior practicing advocates—Anup Raj Sharma and Balaram K.C.—as the judges of the Supreme Court. The appointment of practicing lawyers to the highest Bench is a rather rare happening in our judiciary, which is used to promoting career civil servants and career judges right up to the highest echelons. In the past, such appointments have been fairly low-key affairs since the constituency that was directly affected by such appointments—the Appellate Court judges, the senior members of the Bar and eligible academics—generally kept silent over such appointments.

The two recent additions to the Bench, however, have disturbed the ranks, especially the Appellate Court justices, so much that they have gone so far as to petition the King against the appointments. The outrage is palpable.

Their criticism revolves around a few points. The duo were junior compared to a number of sitting Appellate judges; and, that appointment of Sharma directly as a permanent judge without having served as an *ad hoc* judge, the route most judges in the apex court normally take, is a deviation from a time-honored tradition.

These arguments are limp. The judiciary has to free itself from bureaucratic trappings, if it is to establish meritocracy in its ranks. Both Sharma and K.C. have great track records—Sharma as a successful commercial lawyer and K.C. as a government prosecutor and, since his retirement from the government, as a litigator and arbitrator of repute. They are undoubtedly among the brightest members of the Bar and have a sound understanding of Nepal's judicial system.

Indeed, they are junior to some of the judges in the Appellate Court. But those who say they have greater claims, and not Messrs K.C. and Sharma, to the Supreme Court based on their seniority are ignoring perhaps the most important underlying philosophy. That of the Constitution, which provides no guarantee to appointments to the apex court based on seniority. It is not a process of natural progression.

Sharma and K.C. are only two of the 10 individuals who have been appointed as permanent or *ad hoc* justices of the apex court during the last two lots of appointments. Every other individual who has been appointed as an *ad hoc* judge or confirmed as a permanent judge was from among the Appellate judges. Considering that a far fewer number of lawyers who get appointed to the apex court compared to sitting judges of the Appellate Courts, the obvious question before us is: what was so different about these appointments that outraged the Appellate judges so much?

This reaction can be best understood keeping in view most of the post-1990 appointments, which seem to have created an impression that the apex court positions were the preserves of the career judicial officers and lower court judges. This seems to have given credence to the conventional theory that those from outside the Appellate Courts essentially come in to bite off chunks from the pie—to borrow an expression used recently by a retired Supreme Court justice, Krishna Jung Rayamajhi.

The tendency to take the easy route by appointing the seniormost of the Appellate judges to the apex court has been doubly retarding. It makes the Appellate judges professionally complacent; it also frustrates far more capable lawyers and judges in the lower courts who don't have a shot at the Supreme Court Bench despite their competence.

The fundamental problem lies with the twin issues of seniority and service with the government—both against the letter and spirit of the Constitution. We have been obsessed with the idea of appointing the seniormost of

the Appellate judges to the Supreme Court without actually looking into the competence of the individual under question.

The Constitution, in fact, looks for neither the seniormost individual, nor for an Appellate judge. What it looks for are competent jurists who have either been an Appellate judge for at least 10 years or have been practicing lawyers or law researchers for at least 15. Beyond this, it is purely individual competence that ought to be the deciding factor—not seniority or X number of years one has put in government service. **N**



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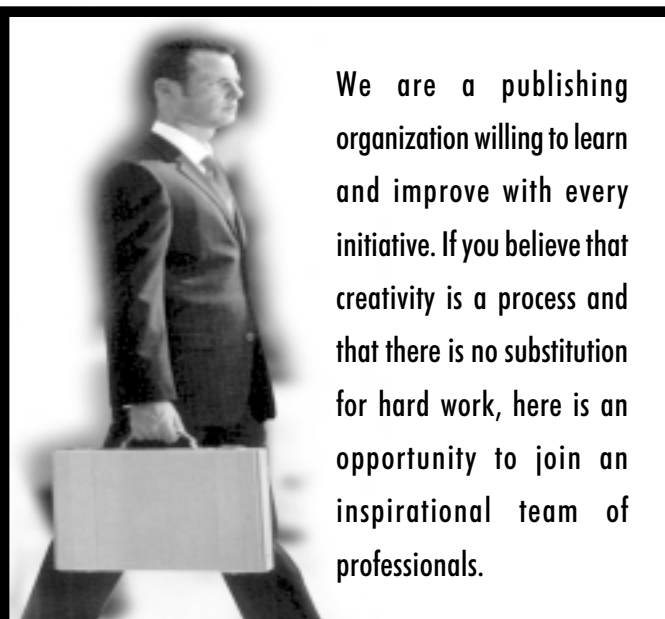
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Ferryman, Get Me Across The Seas

The frequency of bandas has disrupted academic life, forcing increasing numbers of students to seek educational opportunities abroad. The United States remains one of the most sought-after destinations—the growth rates of Nepali student

applicants for the United States is among the highest in the world. Michael Gill, the executive director of the Fulbright Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States and Nepal, talked with Sushma Joshi of Nation Weekly about this outward move. Gill's association with Nepal goes back to the mid 1960s, when he was a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Is Nepal among the countries with the highest numbers of students applying for visas to study in the United States? Not in terms of absolute numbers, but the rate of growth of student applicants is amongst the highest in the world. The growth rates of other countries that have traditionally sent high numbers have leveled off.

Do you see any patterns in the Nepali educational system?

Most Nepali students are pushed into the sciences by employment options, and through family pressure. We get many applicants for the Fulbright who have done many years in science. We have a student trained as an engineer who worked for many years for an NGO building water systems. The system kept on failing, and not because of technical reasons. So finally, he started to study rural sociology in order to understand what's going on at a social level. That's a fairly typical pattern—coming out of the sciences and going into other fields of study.

What's missing here that students can get in the United States?

The lamentable thing about the Nepali educational system is its devaluation of

the humanities and social sciences, not just at the undergraduate level, but even at high school and primary school levels. I happen to believe that a liberal education such as the ones colleges in the United States provide is a real development.

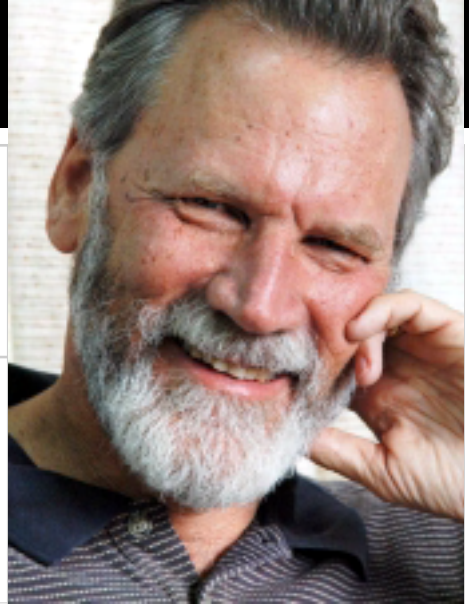
Do you see any moves towards developing this system of liberal education in Nepal?

A number of people have been pushing this idea in Nepal. The proliferation of MBA programs is also a start, although it starts at the top, instead of at the bottom—the critical thinking and individual research skills of a liberal education need to be introduced in college,

The lamentable thing about the Nepali educational system is its devaluation of the humanities and social sciences.

and if possible, even further back in primary school. Knowledge is not something that can be created like a mother bird vomiting regurgitated food into the baby's mouth. It can't be learnt through rote.

Individual efforts and the contribution of private institutions are of course important, since they are the seed of larger developments. But has anything



been done at a national level to implement these ideas?

I am not involved in, or privy to, or updated on government thinking on this area. My job is to provide information to students who seek to get an education in the United States.

What does your work entail?

Part of our job is to figure out if study in the United States is appropriate for a student or not. Many times, it's not. Education in the United States is very expensive—an average of \$20,000 a year. Seventy percent of our students who go are self-funded. Of the other 30 percent, only a small fraction get total financial aid.

You administer the Fulbright program, one of the most sought-after fellowships to the United States. Do you find that people use it as an entryway to migrate to the United States?

We have a 100 percent rate of return of our fellows. Our job is not to fund foreign students to find employment in the United States. Most of the students we select go in areas for which there is not a big employment market in the United States, everything from art to creative writing. We do not fund medicine, engineering and IT students.

Will institutions in Nepal increasingly offering more liberal arts-oriented academics discourage the trend to study abroad?

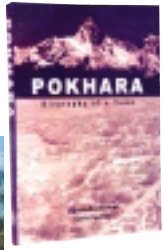
Private education will continue to grow in Nepal—I don't see anything wrong with private education per se. But if Nepal is serious about universal education, they have to strengthen the state of education in Nepal at the public level. **N**

Pokhara Through The Years

REVIEWED BY KARL-HEINZ KRAEMER

Pokhara: Biography of a Town,” written by David Seddon and Jagannath Adhikari, is the fascinating history of the beautiful town in the heart of Nepal that within the last 50 years grew from a small settlement of a little more than 3,000 inhabitants to Nepal’s second largest urban conglomeration. Both authors’ special relationship to Pokhara finds expression in the way the history and social setting of this town is analyzed. Adhikari was born and raised in

But Pokhara also became the commercial and administrative center for the western hill region. This process was dramatic and far-reaching in the second half of the 20th century. Unlike most other studies, the authors of this book view this process of urbanization of Pokhara and its hinterland by adopting an urban rather than a rural focus. This gives the study



special value given that Nepal—a mainly rural society with an urban population of less than four percent in 1971—has now become the country with the highest rate of urban growth in all of South Asia.

Tourism definitely plays a major role in the town’s future development plans, though it currently contributes to only about 10 percent of Pokhara’s total income. The town is blessed with natural attractions like Phewa Taal and a magnificent view of the Himalaya.

Pokhara, while Seddon began his renowned social research on Nepal in Pokhara and its surroundings almost 30 years ago.

The natural setting of the Pokhara Valley makes it hard to believe that this inviting region had been more or less uninhabited by the indigenous Magars and Gurungs before the 12th century. But the development of Pokhara as a market center began only after the unification of Nepal when Newars from Kathmandu Valley settled there to escape persecution from the conquering Shah forces.

From about the 1920s onwards, expanding trade relations with India and the return of local Gurkha soldiers, who had fought for the British in World War I led to the growing political importance of Pokhara as the town became a kind of refuge for dissidents. The town’s close affiliation with political activists became obvious towards the end of the Rana era (and especially during the revolution of 1950/1), and it was again confirmed 30 years later during the National Referendum of 1980.

But in the face of rapid urbanization, town planners and administrators have had problems balancing necessary infrastructure development with environmental protection measures.

The story of immigration is another interesting aspect of urbanizing Pokhara. Most of the permanent immigrants have come from rural Kaski as well as from the neighboring districts. This has meant growing numbers of local indigenous ethnic groups (especially Gurungs) who nowadays constitute the largest population group in a town once dominated by Bahuns, Chhetris, and other Hindu castes as well as, to a lesser degree, Newars.

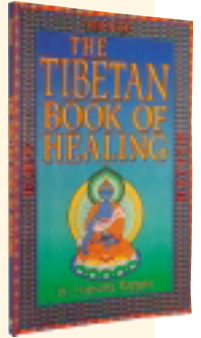
The process of urbanization and the consequent transformations in political, cultural, socio-economic, and environmental aspects of Pokhara are well described. Other issues covered by the book are folk and written literature, tourism, and the interaction of the town with its hinterlands.

Kraemer is associated with the South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg. **N**

Tibetan Healing Made Simple

DR. LOPSANG RAPGAY

Here is a thoughtful, clearly-written introduction to the Tibetan tradition of healing, a tradition which has points in common with Ayurveda from India and with Chinese medicine. The book discusses health and wellness; the fundamental principles of Tibetan medicine; the Tibetan constitutional typology test; diagnosis, nutrition; behavior; the Tibetan Pancha Karma; herbal therapeutics; spiritual practice; rejuvenation therapy; self-healing through the Medicine Buddha Practice; and the Tibetan horoscope.



Empty Moon: Belly Full

JOHN BRANDI

Using the medium of haiku, John Brandi, poet, essayist and passionate traveler, shares his experiences, insights and observations from his years on the road as a traveler in India and Nepal.

Brandi’s haiku capture bits and pieces of life in the subcontinent, much like well-framed photographs do. And just like good photographs, his haiku bring to light small things that often go unnoticed. An excerpt:

climbing Ganesha’s
belly, an expedition
of ants

Empty Moon: Belly Full, is filled with many such quirky montages that capture the small but telling things that make up our lives.

Brandi is the author of “A Question of Journey” (essays on travel in India, Nepal, Thailand and Bali). His other books include “Heart-beat Geography,” “Visits to the City of Light.”

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Thaw That Was Overdue

When you start your armed movement questioning the fundamentals of a multiparty democracy, and then give the movement a strong republican twist every time public anger over the King's action rises, you are more than likely to feel happy about the fallout between the parties and the King. You will even consider your action a grand success if you are able to cut a deep wedge between the two whose unity stands in the way of your ascendance, and a possible usurpation of state power.

The Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), which now controls huge swathes of territory outside the district headquarters and urban centers, must be on a high. And we are not referring to their military strength here. The political parties and the Palace have never appeared so deeply polarized in the last 14 years of democracy as they are now. This has given NCP (Maoist) the opportunity to make inroads in the hearts and minds of the people, especially in rural areas where feelings of exclusion remain high. Revolutions after all are as much about raising battle-hardened armies as about keeping your ranks motivated through the right noise. Emotions and symbols hold huge meanings.

In hindsight, October 4 marks the beginning of a dark chapter in Nepal's history. In refusing to see eye to eye, the political parties and the monarchy did enormous damage to each other through mutual recriminations. When King Gyanendra took executive powers after dismissing an elected government, the thinking was that absolute power would help resolve what the political parties had failed to do. Perhaps the solution lay in wielding the stick. In the vestiges of the Panchayat, the new regime found a ready constituency to champion its two-

pronged strategy: advocate militarist approach to tackle the insurgency and vilify the parties (which was fine given the parties' colossal failure to win public confidence post-1990). In some foreign governments, notably the United States, the new regime even found allies who thought the insurgency would be swiftly resolved through a strong King backed by a powerful Army.

Nineteen months on, and two appointed governments later, Nepal is as far away—perhaps farther—from finding a lasting resolution to the Maoist insurgency as it was when it all started. As a matter of fact, the long battle of attrition between the King and the parties has even handed the initiative back to the Maoists. It has hardly helped that the new regime is not seen to be an inclusive one and that there is widespread apprehension that political and civil rights



are being rolled back. Thankfully, even our allies now seem to have realized so much, that legitimacy holds key to effective governance. The United States last month called on the

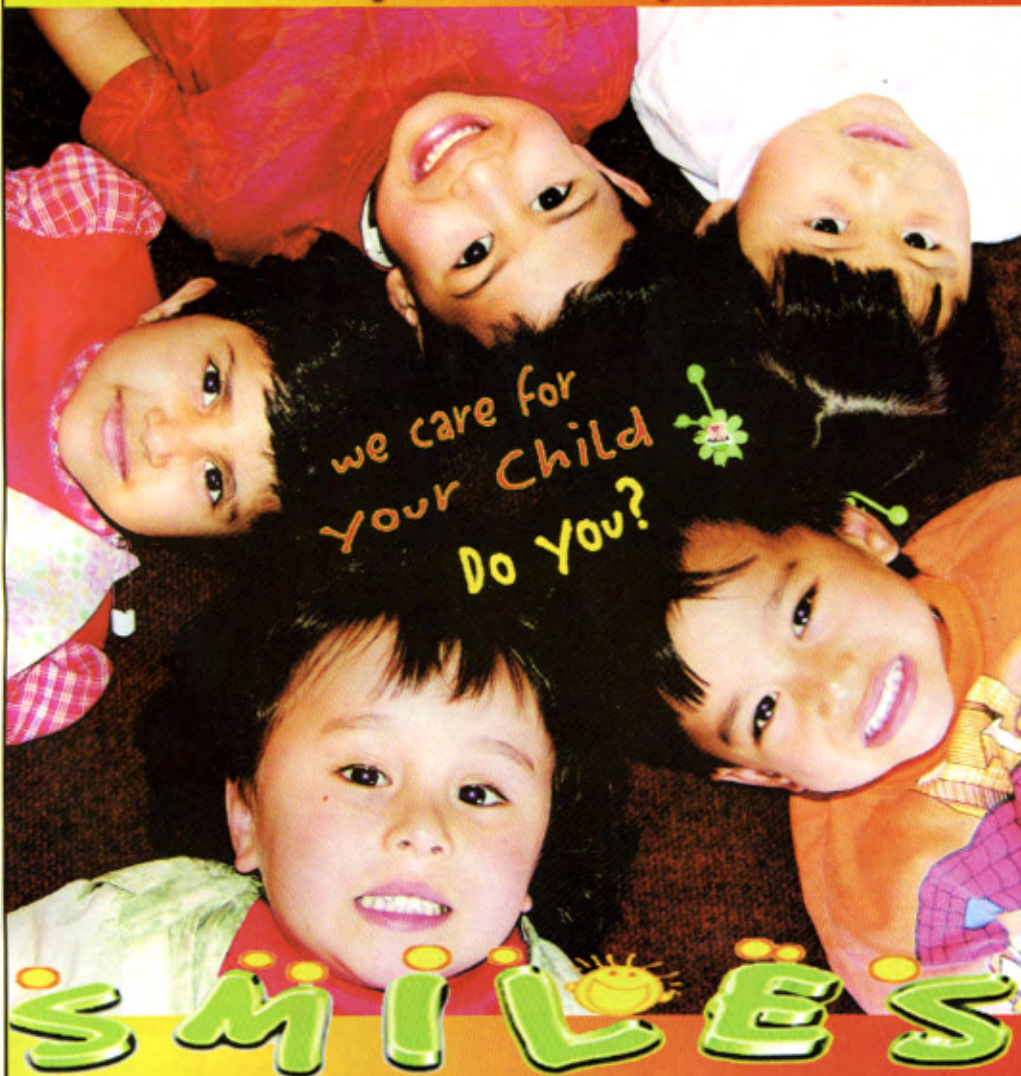
Palace and the parties to “unify—urgently—under an all-party government as the first step to restoring democracy and presenting a unified front against the terrorist insurgents.”

We believe restoring the peace process should be a top priority for the unified front. We are encouraged by the recent turn of events that started with the King and the parties listening to each other in Nargarjun, though we would like to advise cautious optimism. For now, the parties and the King are at least talking.

Editor

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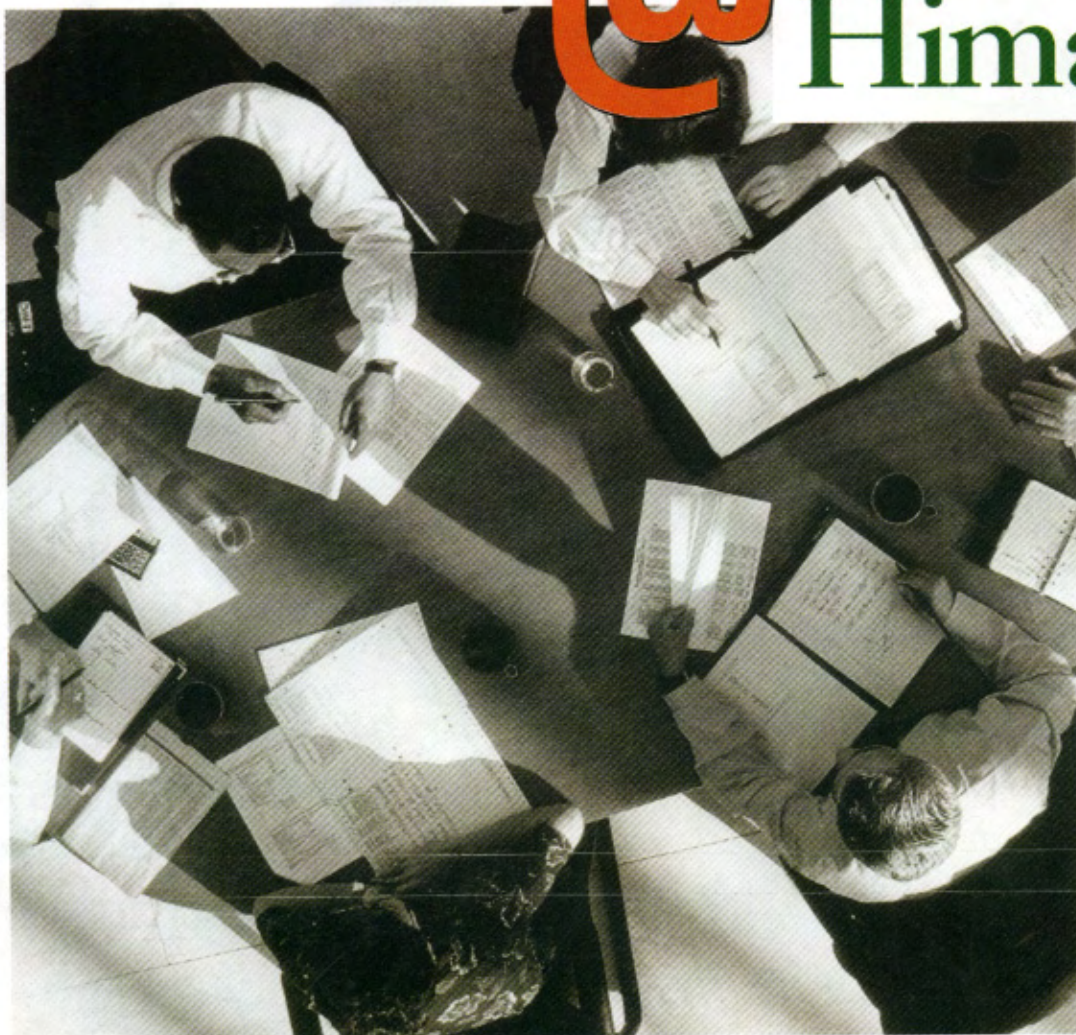


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